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Gender Differences in Consumer-Retailer Relationship Building via Retail Store Attributes

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Introduction In the current retail environment facing increased competition and declining customer loyalty, relationship marketing has received significant attention from both academics and practitioners. Relationship marketing refers to marketing activities geared toward establishing, cultivating, and sustaining successful relational exchanges between marketing entities, such as retailers and consumers (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Although the importance of relationship marketing is well understood in marketing in general, research, to date, has been limited to: (1) developing conceptual studies proposing relationship marketing models across different service/retail contexts, (2) examining its outcomes such as satisfaction, commitment, trust, and attitudinal and behavioral loyalty, and (3) testing selected attributes driving customer-company relationship building. Less attention has been paid to consumer-company relationship building via a variety of retail attributes and its moderators. This study aims to enrich the current knowledge by exploring: (1) how a comprehensive set of retail attributes affects consumer-retailer relationship building and (2) if such relationship building process differs by gender.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses De Wulf et al.'s (2001) relationship exchange model states that customer loyalty is predicted by perceived relationship quality, which in turn comes from perceived relationship investment. The model also suggests that perceived relationship investment is determined by relationship marketing tactics which vary from tangible (e.g., rewards, direct mail, and product quality/price) and intangible tactics (e.g., interpersonal communication and service quality). Drawing on this model and considering that a retailer's offerings signal the retailer's efforts to satisfy customers' needs thereby to build a relationship with them, this study proposes retail store attributes, retail mix elements which reflect store characteristics or images, as relationship marketing tactics, stimulating customer-company relationship building. Specifically,

H1. Favorable retail store attributes positively influence perceived relationship investment.

H2. Perceived relationship investment positively influences perceived relationship quality.

H3. Perceived relationship quality positively influences loyalty intention.

This study further posits that such customer-company relationship building process may work differently by gender. Research evidence in the psychology and marketing literature supports that gender differences exist in various domains such as decision-making processes, evaluations and use of services and products, and patronage behaviors (e.g., Korgaonkar et al., 1985; Sparks & Callan, 1997). Compared to males, females exhibit stronger communal concern, stronger desire to have harmonious relations, greater sensitivity to others, and stronger interpersonal and brand relationships. On the other hand, males engage in more task-oriented and instrumental behaviors than females. In this respect, tangible retail attributes would be more effective for males and intangible attributes would be more so for females for relationship marketing. Thus,

H4. Gender moderates the strengths of the relationships among retail store attributes, perceived relationship investment, perceived relationship quality, and loyalty intention.

Method and Results A Web-based survey was undertaken for data collection. Measures of research variables were adapted from previous research. Out of 4,000 invitation recipients, undergraduate and graduate students at a Midwestern university, a total of 183 responses from those who had shopped at a department store within the three months were usable for data analysis (mean age = 29; female = 54.6%). First, EFA revealed four dimensions of retail store attributes relevant to department stores: Promotion (direct mail and rewards), store atmosphere (pleasantness/decoration/image of store), post-purchase (refund/return/exchange policies), and merchandise (price/variety/assortment of merchandise). Second, a well-fitting measurement model was established using CFA with the ML estimation (AMOS 20.0). Reliabilities, convergent and discriminant validity were also confirmed. Third, SEM provided overall support for hypotheses 1-3 (Figure 1). Forth, to test gender moderation, a series of moderated regression analyses were performed (SPSS 21.0). The results yielded partial support for hypothesis 4 that the promotion – relationship investment association is stronger for males than females, while the store atmosphere - relationship investment link becomes stronger for females than males.

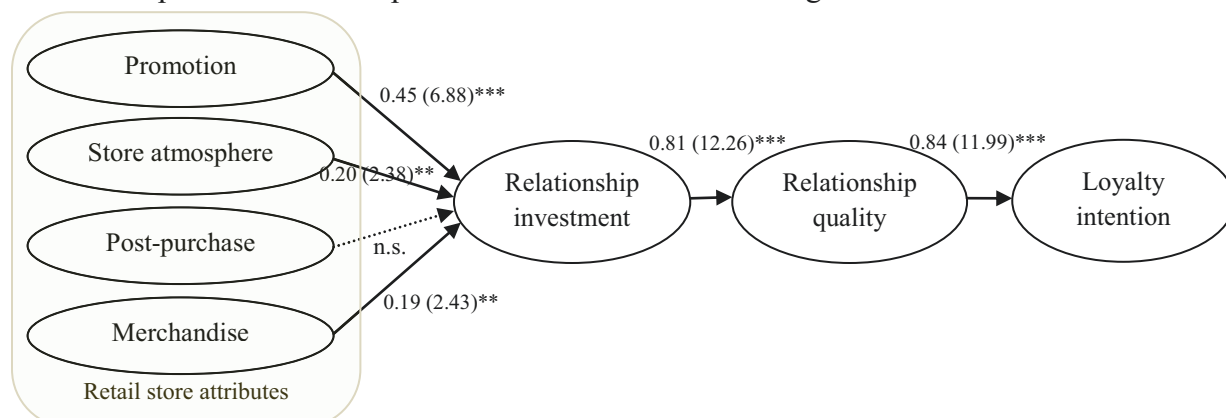


Figure 1. Resulted Model

Note. Numbers are standardized factor loadings and critical ratios in parentheses. ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Discussion Findings from this study show that retailers earn customer loyalty through relationship marketing tactics, namely promotion, store atmosphere, and merchandise by which such relationship signals evoke consumers' perceptions that the retailers make efforts toward relationship investment and relationship quality. Post-purchase is an important factor of store attributes, yet having weak impact on customer-retailer relationship building. Moreover, this study reveals that gender moderates the strengths of the store attributes – perceived relationship investment associations. In building relationships with retailers, females are more attracted to store atmospheres than males, but males are more reliant on promotion than females. Our findings provide important implications for retailers that different aspects of store attribute appeal differently to male versus female consumers, thereby relationship-oriented retailers need to differentiate their relationship building strategies accordingly.

References available upon request